~~NT. 1:57-66~~

Waiting
Luke 1:57-79
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In the Gospel according to Luke there is a long and elaborate ~~section~~ chapter which precedes the story of Jesus' birth. The section ~~has been designated as the first chapter of the book and~~ includes material contained in none of the other Gospels. The story of the "Annunciation" is found here: that unlikely encounter between the young fiance of Joseph, and Gabriel - angel of the Lord - during which Mary is told that she will conceive and bear a son. Mary's response, known to the Church down through the centuries as the "Magnificat", follows the announcement: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden."

That is in the middle of the first chapter: wrapped around it -at the beginning and end - is another story, a rather long and complex account that deals with Zechariah, his wife Elizabeth, and their soon-to-be-born Son, who will be named John.

No one pays much attention to the first chap. of Luke.
~~In terms of literature, the story is not really essential~~. In fact it's a little like those books ~~we've all read~~ which require a good hour of hard reading before the plot actually begins. Besides, we Protestants are a little embarassed by all the attention paid to Mary in the First Chapter of Luke, and subsequently by our Roman brethren across the centuries. Our method of dealing with what has become a very important element in Roman Catholic tradition has been notoriously to ignore it. Mary may have born~~e~~, fed, weaned, raised and lived with Jesus, but you wouldn't know that in most Protestant Churches except for a minor part she plays in a few Christmas Carols.

In any event that's not essential to what I wish to think about with you this morning, but the other story is. I would submit that the material is in the third Gospel for a reason - a reason, I have concluded, that is rather important and I should like to discuss it with you under the title "Waiting".

But first, let's get reacquainted with the principals. In the fifth verse of the first chapter we are introduced to a most interesting couple: Zechariah, a devout priest of the Temple, an old man and his equally aged wife, Elizabeth. They had no children and it was a matter of deep concern to them. Although long past the time when conception ordinarily occurs, old Zechariah continued to pray fervently that he would be given a child, and that his wife might be spared the special Hebrew stigma described negatively and coldly as "barreness".

One day, as he was taking his priestly turn burning incense in the Temple, Zechariah had a vision: his wife would conceive and bear a son to be named John. When Zechariah emerged from the Temple to bless the people according to custom, he was speechless - an appropriate response to such a dramatic experience, except that his speechlessness extended throughout the period of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

It is then that the announcement comes to Mary: Luke describes a meeting between Elizabeth and Mary - kinswomen, relatives: and the fact that somehow Elizabeth recognized the tremendous significance of what was transpiring. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Elizabeth said to Mary.

When Elizabeth bore a son her friends rejoiced. And when she and her still speechless husband took him to the Temple on the 8th day for circumcision, everyone assumed that he would be named after his father. Elizabeth protested and when Zechariah was consulted he asked for a tablet and wrote: "His name is John". Suddenly he was able to speak again, and he said quite a bit. Listen to Zechariah:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has
visited and redeemed His people.....
And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High:
for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways.
to give light to those who sit in darkness and
the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

That hymn of praise, from the lips of a man who had been speechless for nine months, had waited a long time to be said. And waiting is the essence of the season of Advent. Advent has been described as a time of leaning forward in anticipation, straining to see what will happen next.

Now, one would be naive to try to simplify the phenomenon called the Christmas spirit in our culture. It is anything but simple: there are overtones and undertones that are subtle and powerful and deeply human. Christmas arouses us emotionally: experiences that are common, everyday, suddenly, at Christmas, become lovely, touching, significant. Love is more intense, pain is more painful, loneliness unbearable, generosity obviously more real. It's almost as if our intellects, spirits and emotions are on edge - raw - sensitive.

And beneath it all, I would submit, is the very real human experience of waiting. Ordinarily we would not assign much significance to waiting. For busy Americans waiting is frustration, time lost, time wasted. No agony is quite as exquisite for a busy man or woman, than spending the afternoon in a Doctor's office - in a "waiting room". But I am suggesting that there is theological significance in that experience and that it has to do with what we are about in the Christmas season.

Zechariah and Elizabeth waited all their lives for a son. And the important thing to understand is that when the son was born, it punctuated a reality for them far greater than the birth itself.

The birth of John meant that the waiting was over; not only waiting for a child - but for God to act. "It has happened", Zechariah proclaimed: "I not only have a son, but now there is light in the darkness and peace."

The Bible is full of people waiting. In one sense the Bible is a story about waiting: the Hebrew tribes waiting for years in Egyptian slavery: the same tribes wandering around the wilderness of Sinai for forty years, waiting to settle in a land of their own: centuries later they are waiting again, this time in Babylon - for freedom: waiting over the centuries for God's final act of redemption, waiting for the Day of the Lord, the coming of the Messiah. And to bring it immediately into focus, those same people, post New Testament, waited from 70 A.D. until 1947, dispersed throughout the world, pushed into ghettoes, concentration camps and finally gas chambers, waiting for a restoration, a home, freedom, and their waiting for peace and light in the shadow of death is not yet over.

Waiting is no small matter: it is certainly more significant than merely passing time in the context of the Bible. And the common thread between that and our own experience is that much of human life - our lives - is invested in waiting.

Helmut Thielicke, German theologian, observes that waiting is "the burden, the driving force to say nothing of the privilege of mankind." (How To Believe Again. P.172)

Waiting is certainly an early human experience. Second only to ("we'll see",) ("wait") is probably my most frequent verbal transaction with my own children. And they both mean the same thing. Little children wait for that grand day when they go off to school: they wait impatiently to be big enough to play football: they wait for the years to bring them to the event of the first date: they wait for college, graduation, marriage. As I look back on it now I realize how much time in college

was invested in waiting to get out and on with life. We wait for children, for a better job, a promotion, a new house. Sometimes - many times, (and here comes the theology again) - life seems to stand still and we find ourselves waiting without knowing what we are waiting for. We wait for freedom, leisure, retirement: and one of the new problems precipitated by extended life-expectancy is how to prevent people in residential care centers and homes for the aged from doing nothing but waiting for death.

What are we waiting for? What is it about us that causes us to be unable to live fully in the present because of our preoccupation with the future? Langdon Gilkey suggests that, "The great middle class, especially its executive and professional leaders - even those who comment learnedly on this same theme - find it almost impossible just to "be", and merely to enjoy some aspect of their present being: food, talk, beauty, sleep, rest or love. For many of us, all meaning involves activity that builds something to be enjoyed at some future time" (Naming the Whirlwind P.338) That is to say, we are obsessed with waiting. And Wayne Oates, a highly regarded Southern Baptist, ~~holds~~ believes that we get caught in this waiting and wishing ~~only~~ for some far off date in the future to the degree that we cease to function as persons in the present. Oates titled his book, significantly, (The Confessions of a Workaholic.)

What are we waiting for? Why this deep expectancy that the future will fulfill what is unfulfilled in the present?

Some of the keenest literary minds have had a go at that. Samuel Beckett in his play Waiting for Godot suggests that there is something for which all men wait and without which life has little meaning. Two tramps wait, day in and day out, for Godot - who never appears. In their waiting they talk nonsense, inconsequentials, just empty chatter. If only Godot would come they would know what to do next.

But Godot never comes, and one is left with the rather dismal conclusion that nothing in life really matters very much: that whatever it is we are anticipating, it isn't ever going to happen.

Arthur Miller in the classic Death of a Salesman tells the depressing story of a small-town salesman, Willie Loman, whose entire life-time is spent waiting for something great to happen. Waiting is what keeps him going: and when it becomes clear that nothing great is ever going to happen he begins to come apart at the seams and finally takes his own life.

I believe we can find ourselves in that if we are candid. I think we are waiting - much of the time: waiting for something we can't quite identify: waiting for something as vague as Godot and as important as Willie Loman's dream. I believe all of us are waiting for "it" to happen, even though we may not know what "it" is.

Disraeli, Emerson, Longfellow - in one form or another suggested that "Everything comes if a man will only wait". Well, maybe. And then again, maybe not.

What is it? For what are we waiting? I'm inclined to look again to old Zechariah as he sensed that his waiting was over. In his burst of oratory he said something about a ("day dawning from on high - giving light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.")

Isn't that it? Is there a better way to describe it? Aren't we really waiting for something or someone to tell us that our lives make sense: that there is a God? Aren't we waiting for a sense of wholeness in the present - at-homeness in our world? Aren't we waiting for some sense that our relationships with our wives and husbands and children and parents and loved ones are permanent - that our death or theirs does not terminate those relationships?

Aren't we waiting to know that death will not be the final and only answer to our questions? Aren't we really rather well-described as ("people sitting in darkness"), or working frantically in the darkness - as the case may be, but in any event, waiting in the shadow of death?

Aren't we waiting for what the Jews meant when they used the word "salvation"? That's the word Zechariah uttered when he looked at his infant son John. That's what Israel waited for: that's the content of all that waiting for the Messiah: and that, I am suggesting, is what is behind and beneath the universal human experience of waiting.

The remarkable assertion of the old priest Zechariah is that the waiting is over: not simply his life of waiting for a son: but the universal human waiting for salvation. "It" has happened; the shadow of death is banished, there is light in the darkness: peace, wholeness, "shalom" is now possible in the present, because in mercy and love and tenderness God is coming among us. In the birth of Mary's child the future begins - and that far-off vision of "salvation" becomes an immediate reality.

I'm glad Luke preserved that story for us, because it is as contemporary as the waiting which you and I experience every day. And it speaks to us as we lean forward in anticipation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.* Our waiting is over. and as we wait for some sense of fulfillment. beyond Xmas

There is a sequel to the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and their infant son which serves well as a ~~supplement~~ conclusion and antidote to the heady Christmas spirit, however. Years later Zechariah's son, known as John the Baptist, sent a messenger to Jesus asking if he really were the one, or should they look for another: should they resume their waiting? That is to say, every day is not Christmas,* knowing that our waiting is over does not mean that a person will be bubbling with peace, wholeness and salvation twenty four hours a day, every day.

* even in the Bible. Even the men around Jesus - even John the Baptist - had days when they were unable to see the Kingdom of God in their midst. Days when they felt as if they were still waiting in darkness.

That is why it is necessary to observe a Christmas once a year: not simply to remember the birth but to celebrate the reality the birth signals - Because "it" happens only occasionally for most of us, with a lot of waiting in between. - a lot of sitting in the darkness...

But every now and then it breaks through, in the highly-charged anticipation of Advent, in the faces of little children, in the words of a beloved carol, and we know deeply within ourselves that the waiting is over.

Hear again the words of that singularly fortunate first man to experience what I have been trying to describe: old Zechariah, his voice returned at the birth of a son.....

> "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people....
> And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High....
> to give knowledge of salvation to His people:
> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death: to guide our feet into the way of peace."
>
> Amen.

Father, each of us is waiting - forChristmas, but more than that really. We wait, Father, for good news, for your word of love, for the assurance of your Kingdom in our midst. Help us to hear and see - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

incl. prayer when you have space.